



Founding the Committee for Women's Studies

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Founding the Committee for Women's Studies

Yaël Simpson Fletcher

1970s.

Students establish an ad hoc Committee for Women's Studies to lobby for a concentration in the field.

By the mid-1970s, as the Boston area women's movement fragmented, Radcliffe student activists—liberal feminists, radical feminists, socialist feminists, Third World feminists, and Marxist-Leninists—joined together to fight for women's studies at Harvard. Part of the forgotten story of the student movement of the 1970s, the Committee for Women's Studies aimed to create a Women's Studies Department along the lines of the embattled Afro-American Studies Department and to infuse women's scholarship and experience into the entire Harvard curriculum. The egregious exclusion of all but a few distinguished women from Harvard's faculty and the invisibility of women in our studies kept us focused on the task at hand. We had a multi-pronged strategy, from educational forums to leaflets and petitions to negotiating with the administration. At the time, as an art student, I saw my main contribution to the Committee for Women's Studies as designing educational and polemical materials. As a historian today looking back, I can discern in my participation in the Committee for Women's Studies the beginnings of my long-standing research interests in feminism, gender, and race. I still carry with me lessons learned about respecting the political, social, and cultural differences among us,

the painful personal costs of racism and homophobia, and the importance of taking a stand in the supposed “ivory tower” of academia.

[See Image 23: Women studies poster]

1978.

Faculty Council establishes a Committee on Women’s studies to encourage the development of departmental courses in the field.

The Faculty Committee will not recommend establishing a department or a concentration in women’s studies, Edward L. Keenan ’57 dean of the Graduate school of Arts and Sciences and chairman of the Faculty Committee, said yesterday. The standing committee that would be created would primarily concern itself with encouraging departments to offer courses in women’s studies, and would probably not offer courses on its own, Keenan said.

-Harvard Crimson, May 24,

1978

A graduate student said she thought it was unfortunate that someone could go through Harvard and “not know a single thing about one woman in the world.”

-*Harvard Crimson*, Feb 9,

1979

1986.

Harvard faculty debates Women's Studies.

A month after a leading British historian [Olwen hufton] accepted the University's first joint tenured position in Women's Studies, the field is on the verge of becoming an official Harvard concentration . . . As the vote approaches, however, the idea that was first advanced more than eight years ago remains a subject of disagreement among professors.

"Courses taught by women under Women's Studies have been a vehicle for feminist propaganda," Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., Professor of Government, said yesterday.

"People want Women's Studies as a political symbol, but you'll find that no one will concentrate in it," said David Riesman '31, Henry Ford II Professor of Social Sciences *Emeritus*.

It may disrupt the process of integration of Women's Studies courses with other disciplines," said Steven E. Ozment, professor of history and associate dean of undergraduate education. "It's like trying to bottle

sunlight,” said Ozment. “The experience of women is so broad that it may be impossible for a set core of courses to define it.”

“I think Women’s Studies would be the best 350th gift that Harvard would get,” said Assistant Professor of History, Catherine Clinton.’

-All from the *Harvard Crimson*, Oct. 23, 1986

With only one dissenting voice, the Faculty of Arts and Sciences voted yesterday to create an undergraduate degree-granting program in Women’s Studies . . . “I am delighted,” said Women’s Studies Committee Chairman Susan R. Suleiman, professor of Romantic and comparative literature. “This is a really important and historic day for Harvard and I am gratified by the reaction of my colleagues who have shown they are not unresponsive to the needs of students.”

-*Harvard Crimson*, Nov. 19, 1986

Harvard is latest of some 450 schools, including the seven other Ivy league colleges, to adopt women’s studies, a field first recognized in the late 1960s and now considered at the cutting edge of many scholarly disciplines.

. . . The approval yesterday followed several years of work by a faculty committee and a petition signed last spring by 2,104 students, nearly one-third of Harvard's undergraduates.

-Boston Globe, November 19, 1986